

Spectacle of Death

by Scarlet Eve

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Summary: [A/U] 1950s - Private Investigator Heero Yuy is asked to take on a case involving the death of a high profile millionaire. With ties to a local mafia family, a financially and morally bankrupt circus, and other nefarious deeds, Heero Yuy realizes that this case will be harder to crack than his usual jobs. At least until he meets a mysterious woman.

## 1. Chapter 1

\_Spectacle of Death

>Chapter 1<em>

\_by Scarlet Eve \_

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><p><em>Friday<em>

\_6:23 am\_

Dorothy Catalonia-Bocharov stepped out of the backseat of her husband's Mercedes-Benz, the heel of her shoe promptly sinking into the grass. The ground was soft and muddy because of the incessant rain. Even the car's wheels were beginning to sink into the ground. Ahead of her, Bocharov's Spectacular Show sprawled out over the fairgrounds, the tents sagging under the weight of the water. The show would probably be cancelled, unless the blasted rain let up. Dorothy pulled her coat around herself tighter, and lowered her hat's brim to better keep the rain from her face and hair. She threw a look over her shoulder at the driver.

"I should only be a moment."

A phone call had come an hour before, waking Dorothy from her sleep. The ringmaster told her over the phone in a shaky voice that they'd found her husband, Bartok Bocharov, dead in the big top. He gave no

other details, and Dorothy had not asked. She told him not to call the police just yet, then dressed and woke her driver.

And here she was, balancing on the toes of her shoes to keep her heels from sinking through the grass, walking towards the big top. The ringmaster and a few performers stood at the open tent flap, waiting for her.

Dorothy slowed as she approached, staring down the ringmaster. He was badly bending his hat in his hands out of nervousness. She ignored him and the performers, and stepped through the tent flap. Lamps were lit inside the big top, and the rank smell of wet straw wafted up her nose. Dorothy held her gloved hand up to her nose to block the smell, filling her senses with leather instead. A spotlight in the middle of the tent was on, and as she approached, she could see her husband.

He was hanging from the flyer's bar with his knees, his arms outstretched over his head. From her vantage point, she could see that his legs were tied to the bar, to keep him from falling. There was a deep red gash in his neck, and the blood had dripped down onto the hay and dirt below, at least until his blood ceased to flow through his veins. His shirt had come untucked and the pasty white expanse of his belly was exposed to the glaring spotlight.

Dorothy glanced at the ringmaster, who'd followed her into the tent.

"Take him down and bury him somewhere. Don't call the police," she said. The ringmaster paled.

"Are you sure? The police should know!" he began to say, but Dorothy shook her head.

"I'll take care of it," she replied. Her eyes met the cold green and cold blue of a pair of siblings who worked on the circus - an acrobatic clown and a knife thrower, but their names escaped her. She gave them a curt nod and made her way back to the tent flap and stepped outside in the rain. She stood for a moment, taking in the smell of the rain and the wet earth, erasing the memory of wet straw from her olfactory memory. Without a backwards glance, she walked on her toes to keep her heels from sinking into the soft ground, reached her car and climbed back inside, signaling the driver to take her home. Before the view of the circus left the back window, Dorothy wiped a tear from her cheek.

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><p><em>Friday <em>

\_10:30 am\_

Heero Yuy, private investigator, leaned forward on his desk, a cigarette dangling from his fingers. His head was throbbing in the worst way, and his vision refused to clear. It was a hangover of the worst kind, and while he might have stopped for a pint of whiskey on his way into work, he found his wallet empty. All that had been left in his coat pockets was a crushed pack of cigarettes and a few sheets of paper with names and addresses. Work had been slow lately, though he should have realized that it was partly his fault. Perhaps if he

actually solved a case once in a whileâ€!

Just as he was about to drift to sleep, there was a heavy knocking on his office door. Heero sat up with a jerk and shook his head, trying to stop the spinning. "Come in!" he called, and took a drag from his cigarette. It was mostly ash by now, but there was still enough left to give his brain a little jump start. He straightened his button down shirt and ran a hand through his tangled, unruly hair.

The door opened and a tall, blonde woman stepped inside. She wore a wide-brimmed hat that covered most of her face, and a long black coat. Both were wet from the rain still falling outside. Inside the overly warm office, she looked uncomfortable, and almost had that "drowned rat" look to her. But that was until she removed the hat and coat, hanging them up on the coat rack beside the door. Underneath the coat was a dark blue sheath dress, which appeared to be made of velvet, or something like it. The hem dropped to her knees, and the front was viciously low cut. Heero had to blink several times before remembering that he was supposed to be professional. The woman stepped up to the chair on the other side of the desk and sat down, her blue eyes leveling on Heero.

"Can I help you?" Heero managed to say. Through he told himself he wouldn't chain smoke, this woman had thrown him off balance. He reached inside his desk drawer and pulled out another cigarette and lit it with a match from a matchbook he'd lifted from some grody motel he'd once stayed at. Before the woman spoke, she snatched the cigarette from his fingers, took a long draw, then stuck the cigarette back between his fingers. He blinked at her.

"My name is Dorothy Catalonia-Bocharov," she said, "since you haven't asked me yet." Heero managed to pull himself together enough to draw a notebook in front of him and picked up a pencil. He jotted down her name at the top of the page. He stuck the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and met her eyes.

"And what can I do for you, Miss Catalonia-Bocharov?" he asked. For a moment, he thought the woman was going to smile, but instead, her face crumpled a bit more, though to Heero, it almost looked contrived.

"I need you to find the killer of my dearly departed husband," she said, lightly touching her cheek with a gloved hand. Heero blinked. A gig and it wasn't even noon! Heero nodded solemnly.

"Have you called the police already?" Heero asked. Dorothy shook her head, a few loose strands of blonde hair brushing her cheeks and ears.

"I'm afraid they're not going to be able to do anything," she said. "My husband has many business arrangements, and digging out those skeletons will only jeopardize my own safety." She paused, her eyes still staring Heero down. He knew that most people who referred to "business arrangements" were dealing with the mafia. "I need someone who can be discreet."

Heero could be whatever she wanted him to be. He nodded. "Of course, Mrs. Catalonia-Bocharov," he said.

"Please, just call me Miss Dorothy," she replied.

"Uh, sure. Miss Dorothy. Can you give me the details of your husband's murder?" She nodded, and from where, Heero couldn't be sure, she drew out a handkerchief and began to recount the story of the big top at the circus, occasionally dabbing at her eyes with the little square of fabric. Heero listened, occasionally jotting down details on the notepad that he thought might be relevant later. Heero shuddered at her retelling of his body hanging from the big top, and the fact that the blood had eventually stopped dripping from the slice in his neck. She spoke at length about his various business deals that could get him in trouble, including ties with the Dioli family, the local chapter of the mafia in the city.

She dabbed her eyes one more time and the handkerchief disappeared to whence it came. She rose and leaned forward over the desk, keeping her eyes locked with Heero's. Her breasts were dangerously close to making an unscheduled appearance.

"Will you take the case?" she asked, her head tilted to the side. Heero nodded, afraid to say no. Besides, he needed the cash. A slow smile crossed Dorothy's lips, and she pulled herself back up to her full height. She turned and stuffed her hand inside a pocket of her coat and drew out an envelope. It was thick and sealed. She dropped it on the desk in front of him. "Here's a retainer. And a little extra for your promise of silence." Heero hand smoothed the envelope, feeling the thick stack of bills inside. He didn't dare open it until she left.

"You have my discretion," he said. "I'll need your contact information as well." Dorothy pulled a white card from her purse and handed it over. Her name was written in curling script at the top, along with her home and office phone numbers and an address. Heero had never seen a woman with business cards.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Yuy," she said, and leaned over his desk once more and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Heero's stomach twisted, and he felt his face heat up. He sat still until Dorothy had taken her things and disappeared from his office, leaving behind the money, her business card, and the lingering smell of her flowery perfume.

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## 2. Chapter 2

\_Spectacle of Death  
>Chapter 2<em>

\_by Scarlet Eve\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Friday</em>

\_12:15 pm\_

The rain had finally stopped, but the clouds still hung low over the city, blocking out any trace of the sun. Puddles formed in every

available location. Heero could only hope that the sun would come out soon and dry up all the water. It was nearly summer, after all, and he thought mother nature should be giving them a break from precipitation.

He walked along a sidewalk, the envelope of cash stuffed into the inner pocket of his coat, and a new pack of cigarettes and a pint of whiskey in his outer pockets. The keys to his office jingled softly in another pocket. He was on his way to a friend's place of work, an auto repair shop called American Wheels. Duo Maxwell, part-time mechanic and part-time schmoozer, worked there and occasionally would help Heero with cases. It kept him out of trouble, anyway.

When Heero arrived, he found Duo leaning over the front of a '47 Ford Pilot, his long brown braid hanging down almost to his knees. The hood of the car was propped up, and Duo was digging around the innards, rhythmically tapping a wrench on a metal piece of the frame. "Maxwell!" Heero called out as he walked up the drive that led into the shop's garages. Duo lifted his head and smiled.

"Well if it isn't Bad News Yuy," Duo said, using the irritating nickname he'd given Heero when the latter had been released from the police force. Duo tossed the wrench on the ground and stepped away from the car. "It's been a while. What brings you over here?" Heero pulled the bottle of whiskey from his pocket an inch, and a wide grin broke out on Duo's face. "How lucky! My lunch just started. Come into my office."

Duo's "office" was just the storage shed behind the shop. He'd put together some makeshift chairs and tables, where he could hang out in between jobs or during his real lunch time. Now though, the two were sitting at the table, passing the pint of whiskey between them while Heero told Duo the details of the case for Dorothy Catalonia-Bocharov.

Duo made a face like something smelly was under his nose and leaned forward in his chair.

"I don't know if I trust this broad," he said. "Her husband ends up dead, she doesn't call the police and says she'll take care of the body? Sounds pretty suspicious."

Heero shrugged. He pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lit it with a match from the book Duo left lying on the makeshift table.

"That's not my business. She already paid- so I might as well put in the effort to find the killer, even if it was her," he replied. Duo still pulled a slightly disgusted face. "He's done business with the Diolis. More than likely, it was them that killed him."

Duo was about to respond when a horrible screeching and popping noise filled the air. Both jerked their heads towards the door of the shed, looking concerned. A moment later, a voice called out "MAXWELL!" Duo groaned, passed the bottle back to Heero, who capped it, and left the shed. Heero was close behind.

They rounded the building to the front of the garage. A car, a '49 Crosley Hotshot, had been pulled into the driveway at a sharp angle. The front end was smoking.

"This damn car never works!" a voice shouted. The owner of the car, a young man of Chinese descent, climbed from the car, over the door, which no longer worked. He landed on the ground with ease and glared at Duo. "I sunk all my money into this damn car!"

Duo smirked and shook his head. He walked towards the front of the car and popped open the hood. "I told you not to buy it," Duo said. "You didn't listen."

Wufei Chang, long time friend of Duo and Heero, was the child of a Chinese immigrant family that ran a dojo, teaching meditation and martial arts. While Wufei loathed most aspects of American culture, he still spent too much of his hard earned money on a lemon of a car.

"Just fix it." Wufei grumbled, crossing the drive towards Heero. Duo rolled his eyes, climbed over the stuck door and navigated the car into the garage, all the engine puffed out black smoke. When he pressed down on the breaks, the horrible screeching noise filled the air.

"What are you doing down here, Yuy?" Wufei asked.

"I got a case this morning," Heero said. "You want in?" His friend shrugged his shoulders.

"Sure, if it'll help pay for the repairs on this car," Wufei grumbled. Heero spent the next few minutes filling Wufei in on the case. By the end of his explanation, Wufei was shaking his head.

"Anyone who deals with those Diolis always ends up dead. You'd think those idiots would learn," Wufei said.

"Yeah, I guess." Heero lit another cigarette and took a drag, watching Duo tinker around with Wufei's car.

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><p><em>Friday<em>

\_7:00 pm\_

The sign hanging from the main gate of the circus said "Closed due to Rain." The short respite had ended a few hours ago, and once again, rain thundered down from the heavens, continuing to soak the already drenched city. Inside Wufei's car, which was temporarily running, Duo, Wufei, and Heero looked at the dreary circus through the window. Because the top wouldn't close all the way over the convertible, a steady stream of water ran into the car, splashing on the floorboards in the backseat, while rivulets ran down the inside of the windshield.

Duo shifted uncomfortably in the middle seat of the car.

"Let's just get this over with. Circuses freak me out," he complained. Wufei and Heero exchanged a look, but said nothing. Heero opened the passenger door and climbed out, while Wufei rolled down the window on his side and slipped through the opening, landing on

the soft grass with a squish. Duo climbed out the passenger side.

The three walked around the main gate, slipping through an opening in the fence, and continued across the deserted midway. Games and attractions were closed down and deserted. The Fun House sat a short distance away, the mirrors on the outside reflecting the rain and the trespassers

As they neared the big top, they could see that there were light on inside. Heero led the way, approaching the flap that was open slightly, and ducked inside.

Though Dorothy had told Heero that the big top was where her husband had been found, there was no evidence of a murder. Instead, the big top had been converted into a circus freak party. Lamps and old, flickering lights filled the tent with a yellow gloom. A group of men, all dressed in black and yellow, provided the music while the performers danced. The risers where the guests would normally sit were covered in food and booze. Duo started towards the bottles of alcohol, but Wufei caught him by the collar.

"We weren't invited to this party," Wufei rasped. Duo grumbled.

A man with a large belly materialized from the crowd, walking towards Heero and the others. He wore a red tuxedo that was lined with gold trim. "I don't believe I know you," he said as he approached. His greasy hair was slicked back, most likely by its own volition.

"My name is Heero Yuy. I'm a private investigator, hired by Dorothy Catalonia-Bocharov to investigate the murder of her husband. These are my associates, Duo Maxwell and Wufei Chang," Heero said. The man nodded.

"Of course. My name is Thomas, the ringmaster. If there's anything I can help you with, please let me know," he said. Heero observed him, noticing how nervous he seemed to be. There was a hat between his hands that was being crushed and twisted by whatever nervous energy this man had. Heero pulled his notebook from his pocket and jotted down the man's name and a few notes.

"Who found the body?" Heero asked. Thomas nodded, turned, and whistled. From the crowd, two tall performers emerged, both dressed in, for lack of a better term, eye catching clothing. The man was tall with light brown hair, wearing a pair of ballooned pants with stars and crescent moons all over, and suspenders over his naked torso. The young woman beside him had on the shortest dress possible, which revealed her long, bare legs. Her curly brown hair was darker than her companion's, and instead of green eyes, she had blue.

"This is Trowa and Catherine, my star attractions. They found the body this morning," Thomas explained. He turned to the two stoic performers. "Tell them what you know," he added, and left. Heero shifted his gaze to the performers, jotting down a few more notes.

"What time did you find him?" Heero asked.

"Six this morning," answered the woman, Catherine. "We were up early to practice."

"Did you see or hear anything?" Catherine shook her head.

"He wasn't even bleeding anymore by the time we got here," she said. "Must have been up there for hours!" Her gaze drifted to the hand bars suspended above the ring. Heero thought she looked wistful.

"Was anything out of place?" Heero asked, his patience running thin. He was also finding it strange that the man just stood beside the woman, staring at them with almost unblinking eyes.

"Just the blood on the floor," Catherine answered. "I suppose you could dust for fingerprints on the ladder, but you'd find the prints of every performer that's ever climbed up and down." Heero wrinkled his nose.

"That won't be necessary," he said. "Where is he now?"

"Buried in the corner of this property." The answer was abrupt and came from the man, Trowa. Heero's eyes shifted to him, and behind him, he could feel Duo and Wufei tensing up.

"Bocharov owns this land," Catherine added. "Well, I should say owned. I suppose his wife owns it now." Heero made a few more notes while trying to avoid the gazes of the two performers. Beside him, he could feel Duo and Wufei shifting uncomfortably. The male performer, Trowa, moved away abruptly before Heero could ask any more questions.

"Is there anything else?" Heero asked the woman, his eyes following the man as he wound through the dancing, drinking circus performers. Catherine shook her head. Heero snapped his notebook closed and was about to withdraw when Catherine stuck her hand down the front of her dress and pulled out three tickets. She handed them over to Heero, who reluctantly took them.

"Why don't you three stop by my show later," she said, adding a wink, before whirling around and disappearing into the crowd. Duo snatched the tickets from Heero's hands.

"'After Dark. A Study in the Exotic,'" Duo read. "It starts in fifteen minutes," he added, checking the watch on his wrist.

"We're not going," Heero said, trying to snatch the tickets away from Duo, who dodged out of the way.

"Yes we are. Come on, Wufei," Duo said, turning to the Chinese man, whose arms were folded over his chest.

"Those shows are obscene," he said. Duo rolled his eyes.

"I'll only take fifteen percent of the payoff for this case, and you two can split the rest," Duo said. His eyes danced with excitement. With matching groans, Heero and Wufei conceded, only because it was rare that Duo would offer to give up money.

The tent that housed the show 'After Dark' was on the far side of the circus grounds, near an overgrown cement lot that was used as a parking lot. Several cars were already parked in haphazard rows.

Wufei pulled his car up alongside one of the others, and the three climbed out. The tent was a dark purple color, almost black looking in the lack of sunlight. A reddish glow issued out from the gaps in the tent flaps. Duo led the way across the spongy grass and lifted the flap to gain entrance.

A burly man in black halted Duo, holding a hand out for the tickets. Duo deposited the three tickets into his large hand, unconsciously taking a step away from him. The man looked at the tickets, ripped them in half and handed half the stubs back to Duo. The three edged their way into the tent around the burly man, entering into the main room through a second flap in the canvas.

A circular platform was set up in the middle of the tent, and three rings of chairs were set up all around in a circle, save for a narrow pathway leading to another flap in the tent. Strings of what looked like oversized Christmas lights hung from the tent poles, throwing off their garish red light. Most of the chairs were already taken by men, but Heero, Duo, and Wufei managed to find three that were together in the third row. Duo was ready to abandon them for a single empty chair in the front row, but Heero once again reminded him that they were on a job.

Eventually, the lights flickered off, and music from a record player began to waft through the room. It was a slow, sultry song, one that Heero had never heard before. With a pop, a single white spotlight turned on, sending a single beam of light from the center of the tent down onto the platform. The tent flap on the other side opened, and a young woman stepped out, wearing very little, and leaving very little to the imagination. She sauntered down the narrow aisle and stepped up onto the platform. The men in the audience began to hoot and holler at the woman, who smiled in a slow, easy way. Her body moved to the music wafting from the record player.

Heero and Wufei crossed their arms over their chests while Duo leaned forward, his elbows propped up on his knees. His mouth hung open as he oggled the dancing woman. Slipping a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, Heero lit one and drew on it, exhaling the smoke through his nose. Wufei jabbed him with a finger, his eyes pleading for a smoke as well. Heero grumbled, but lit another cigarette and handed it over.

The music ended, and the dancing woman bowed low, turning slowly on her toes to bow to the entire group around her. With swaying hips, she stepped off the stage and disappeared behind the curtain. Heero and Wufei began to stand up, but no one else was moving.

"The show's not over, boys," a man said from beside them. Heero and Wufei glanced at each other, then slowly sank back down in their seats. Duo shook his head at them.

New music began, this song a little more fast paced than the previous. From behind the curtain, a woman began to sing. Slowly, the part in the curtain opened, and Catherine, the performer from before, stepped out. Her low, smoky voice was singing along to the music from the record player. Her outfit, while similarly revealing to the previous dancer, was covered in rhinestones and sequins that glittered in the red light of the tent. The smoke from the audiences' cigarettes had collected towards the top of the tent, creating a haze around Catherine, which added a layer of mystery to her

performance.

"She is cookin'," Duo said, his mouth hanging open once more. Catherine had climbed up onto the platform, singing and dancing to the music, moving in such a way to emphasize her barely concealed womanly curves. Heero, once again uncomfortable, crossed his arms and legs, as if he were trying to completely cave in on himself, to hide from the embarrassment he felt. It was bad enough that the reason he was there, Dorothy Catalonia-Bocharov, had managed to invade his mind with her low cut dress and obvious sex appeal. Heero wasn't a prude, but that didn't mean he liked to see woman so naked and so vulnerable.

For another fifteen minutes, Catherine sang and danced on the stage. Finally, to Heero's immense relief, Catherine bowed and disappeared from the tent. This time, the men began to stand, most with cigarettes hanging from their lips. Wufei and Heero shoved Duo out through the tent flaps.

"That was boss," Duo said on their way back to the car. Heero just rolled his eyes.

"I need a drink. Wufei, take us to the bar," Heero said, waiting while Duo climbed into the non-existent middle seat of the car. Wufei nodded, looking pale in the face. Heero climbed in after Duo, squeezing together when he slammed the door closed. The inside of the car was damp from a leak in the windows and convertible top.

Duo began to sing the song that Catherine had performed. "Give a rest, would ya," Wufei barked, speeding the car through the parking lot and onto the main road. Duo scoffed.

"You both need to lighten up. They were dancing for our entertainment," Duo said. "They want us to enjoy it." Heero and Wufei said nothing, so Duo sat back in his seat and hummed the music from the dance.

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### 3. Chapter 3

Spectacle of Death  
>Chapter 3</p>

by Scarlet Eve

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><p><em>Friday</em>

\_9:00 pm\_

Wufei stopped his car along the side of the road in front of their regular, hole-in-the-wall bar, Tim's Billiards. The three men climbed from the car, and Heero led the way inside. The long bar stretched from one end of the room to the other, with a large mirror behind it, lined with bottles of booze. Smaller tables lined the other side of

the room, with the center area taken up by several billiards tables, the green felt worn and scratched from use. The owner, Tim, promised to replace the felt, but he'd been saying that for years.

Cigarette and cigar smoke hung low, the smell mingling with stale beer and peanuts. It was fairly crowded, being a Friday night, and it looked like most people must have gotten their paycheck. A few tables were crowded around by men wearing similar uniforms, and were drinking shots of whiskey. Piles of cash were stacked on the edges of the billiards tables, while the men tried to scam each other at the game.

"Hey there, boys!" The man behind the bar called, waving an arm to them. The bartender, Howard, was a grade A oddball, wearing sunglasses indoors at all time, and always boasting a Hawaiian print shirt, usually in varying colors and gaudiness. He was balding, and the remaining hair had already receded towards the back of his head and stuck out in tufts around his ears. Duo had actually been the one to introduce Howard to Heero and Wufei; Howard ran a not-entirely-legal chop shop in his free time, and Duo had used him several times to get cheap parts for cars.

The three waved back to Howard, crossing the bar and squeezing themselves in between a few occupied stools to order drinks. Without being asked, Howard filled three tumblers with whiskey and pushed them over the bar counter.

"First round is on me," Howard said, lowering his voice. "Finally having some good luck coming my way."

"What happened?" Duo asked. Heero and Wufei picked up their glasses and edged in closer to hear the story.

"I had someone from the Dioli family in shop earlier today," Howard said. "I'm going to be their exclusive chop shop from now on." A wide grin with bad teeth followed. Wufei frowned.

"Getting involved with the mob doesn't sound like good luck to me," Wufei said. Howard shrugged his shoulders.

"They've made a lot of people rich, and this time, they picked me," Howard said. Heero listened, shaking his head to himself. The dollar signs in Howard's eyes were blinding him to dangers of working with the Diolis. He must not know how many people didn't get rich working with the family, and how many people ended up dead.

Howard moved away to serve another customer, so Duo turned to face the other two. "I don't see that going well for him," Duo said, his expression glum. Heero and Wufei nodded their agreement. In one corner, a table freed up, the loud group of men laughing and hanging on each other as they exited the bar. Duo weaved quickly through the crowds to the table and sat down, claiming it for them. Wufei and Heero followed behind.

Now seated, Heero let his gaze pass through the bar, watching the gathered patrons drink and talk and cheat at cards and billiards. Heero knew better than to ever get sucked into a poker game with any of the customers of Tim's Billiards, for they cheated like their lives depended on it. He hadn't been that smart in the past though.

Heero pulled his packet of cigarettes from his pocket and slipped one out, along with his matches. He grunted in annoyance when Duo and Wufei helped themselves to his pack, but said nothing. Once the three were lit, he pocketed his things and leaned back in his chair, the cigarette between his fingers. Heero tuned out Duo and Wufei talking and harassing each other, and most of the other noise, too. He kept his glass cupped in his hands and sipped slowly, letting the mid-shelf whiskey warm him up after the cold ride in Wufei's car. Being damp from the rain made him uncomfortable as well, so he eventually discarded his coat. It was warm in the bar, but mostly from the heat of the bodies of the customers, and it made the air sticky and oily. Heero knew he'd be showering as soon as he got home.

As Heero's buzzed mind drifted along whatever course his thoughts took him, the door opened and a young woman stepped inside. She wore a long, black coat which dripped rain water onto the floor. A small, round hat in pink was pinned to her hair, tilted on an angle, nestled among the curls of her long blonde hair. She removed her coat, revealing a pastel pink tailored suit with a knee length pencil skirt. After shaking out the coat, she draped it over her arm and stepped further into the bar.

"She doesn't belong in here."

"Who doesn't?"

Heero shook head head. He didn't realize he'd spoken. Duo and Wufei were staring at him, eyebrows raised.

"That woman," Heero said, gesturing with his whiskey glass. The woman had crossed to the bar and was waiting while Howard produced a drink for her. It was then that Heero noticed that the noise level in the bar had lessened, and many of the patrons were shamelessly staring at her. Howard placed a martini down on the counter, clear with two green olives. She picked it up and sipped it gingerly, her light blue eyes scanning the bar.

Heero froze when her blue eyes landed on him. She flashed him a smile before her eyes continued to scan the room. Heero blinked, feeling like someone had just opened up his chest and looked at his soul.

"She looks familiar," Wufei said, pulling Heero from his daze. Duo nodded.

"Yeah, I swear I've seen her before."

Heero said nothing, as nothing about her face was familiar. A moment later, Wufei slapped his hand on the table.

"That's it!" he shouted, startling a few nearby patrons. "That's Relena Peacecraft."

"Ohhhâ€|" Duo breathed. "Yeah! You're right!"

"Relenaâ€| Peacecraft?" Heero asked slowly. Duo rolled his eyes.

"You know, from the Peacecraft family? That super wealthy family? Her dad was a politician before he was murdered, and her mother passed away a few years ago. I think she has a brother leftâ€|" Duo said. A glimmer of recognition began to form in Heero's mind, but he still didn't see anything recognizable in her face. He'd probably just heard things about her, but never saw a picture.

"That doesn't explain what she's doing in a dive like this," Wufei said.

The door to the bar opened once more, and this time a very tall, dark skinned man stepped inside. His features looked middle eastern, with dark hair covering his head and his face, though it was neatly groomed. He wore an expensive looking dark colored suit, and was carrying a leather briefcase. He spotted Relena at the bar, and parting the crowd, he made his way over to her.

Heero watched as they exchanged a few words, then stepped away from the bar, but not before a second drink made its way into Relena's hand. They walked together to a small empty table, which had a little card tent in the center that said "RESERVED."

"Some kind of shady business deal," Duo said. Heero couldn't argue, as it looked very much like that. Papers were produced from the leather briefcase, and Relena was reading them over, still sipping on her drink. Something in his mind wanted to resist the idea that this woman who looked so innocent would be involved with something shady. They watched for several more minutes, which included a refill on their drinks, until the middle eastern man packed up the papers and rose from the table. He bowed to Relena, then swiftly exited the bar. She remained behind, sipping on her martini.

"Well, that was exciting," Wufei said sarcastically. He turned his chair so that he was facing Heero and Duo. "We should discuss this case." Heero wasn't in the mood to discuss anything, but he leaned onto his elbows on the table.

"I don't trust those circus clowns," Duo said. "No matter how stacked that Catherine is."

"That's more of a reason not to trust them," Wufei said.

"There's definitely something more going on," Heero agreed with a sigh. "The fact that Miss Bocharov didn't want to go to the police is a red flag." His two partners nodded. "We should explore the mafia ties, which is something I don't want to do, but it looks like that's our only lead."

"Mafia ties? How fascinating." A female voice broke through their conversation, sounding amused. All three men jerked their heads around to see Relena Peacecraft standing near their table, her martini in her hand. She had a smile on her lips, but her eyelids were lowered in almost a seductive way. All three gaped at her for a moment, until she moved around to the empty chair at their table and sat down.

"Uhâ€| Miss Peacecraftâ€| hello," Duo managed to stumble out. He stood up quickly from his chair, giving her a quick, clumsy bow. She grinned. "I'm Duo Maxwell, and these are my buddies, Heero Yuy and Wufei Chang."

"Pleasure," she replied, meeting the eyes of each man. "You're discussing the mafia?" she asked.

"What's it to you, lady?" Wufei asked rather aggressively. Relena didn't flinch at his tone, though Duo reached over and smacked him on the arm. Relena set down her martini glass on the table and leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs as she did so. Her back straightened and she rested her elbows on the table.

"I have a particular interest in the mafia," she said.

"Are you a reporter or something?" Duo asked. The woman laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them.

"Of sorts," she answered.

Heero watched this exchange with his arms across his chest, glowering silently at the young woman. He was slightly put off by how she'd just jumped into their conversation without invitation, but at the same time, he couldn't help admiring how pretty she was, even against the backdrop of the dingy bar. An even smaller part of his mind was impressed at her guts to just walk into a conversation with a bunch of strangers.

"So why are you exploring mafia ties?" Relena asked, glancing between the three of them once more. Duo looked back and forth at Heero and Wufei, as if expecting one of them to say something, but both had the same angry expression on their faces, their arms still crossed over their chests.

"Well Heero here is a private invest-"

Heero whirled in his chair and punched Duo in the arm, whispering through his teeth to be quiet.

"Ow! What's the big idea!?" Duo shouted at Heero, who sat back in his chair and motioned for the waiter to bring him another drink.

"Shut up, Maxwell," Heero said.

"What? Your business is in the damn phone book," Duo said. "She could go figure it out if she wanted to." Heero said nothing, so Duo turned back to Relena. "Heero is a PI, and he's got a case. The only leads we have are to the mafia." Relena tapped her chin with a finger.

"Interesting. What's the case?" she asked. Heero glanced at Duo, who was once again staring at him, almost as if he were asking for permission to speak, even though Duo would say everything anyway. Heero sighed and glanced around. Everyone in the bar was involved in their own business, so he leaned forward over the table. Before he began to speak, the waiter brought back another drink for Heero.

"Another martini, please," Relena said. "Dry. Three olives." The waiter nodded and backed away from the table. Her eyes turned back to Heero and looked at him expectantly.

"Bartok Bocharov was found dead in the big top of his circus. His

wife hired me to find the murderer," Heero said. Relena's eyebrows raised up.

"Huh, interesting. I hadn't heard that he died," Relena said, and to Heero's great interest, she seemed to have thought better about saying anything. Stumbling a bit over her words, she added, "He's rich. You'd think it would have been in the newspaper." Inwardly, Heero grinned. So this young woman had secrets, too.

Heero sipped at his drink while Duo began to chat idly with her, and Relena seemed to have lost interest in the conversation about mafia ties. As Heero's brain began to fog up with drunkenness, he heard Duo say something about fixing Relena's car for free whenever she wanted or needed. Wufei remained silent, as usual when a woman was present. After a while, Relena rose from the table, shook hands with the three men, then disappeared. Heero, already low into his drink, was hustled from the bar after paying his tab (at least he thought he paid his tab), and crammed into Wufei's tiny car.

\* \* \*

><p>-SE</p>

End  
file.